

After 2 Decades, a Final Sermon for Rev. Walsh

By CLAIRE MASSIMO

This year's Christmas season was a bittersweet one for Rev. Robert Walsh at First Parish Church.

At the end of January, Walsh will be retiring from his ministry, 22 years after coming to Duxbury.

Walsh's first experience with the Unitarian Universalist church was as a twenty-three year-old man.

"I was unchurched as a child, then tried out a few, but nothing hooked me. When I first walked into a Unitarian Universalist church I knew right away it was home for me. People were able to be them-

continued on page 7

continued from page one

selves, and be honest about who they are. I didn't have to say a creed that someone else had written and I didn't believe in," Walsh said.

As time wore on, Walsh became more active in the church, on first a regional and then a national level.



Rev. Walsh will leave First Parish at the end of January, after 22 years.



Rev. Walsh is moving on to a new marriage, and hopefully a historical book on Duxbury churches.

"A time came when I realized I was getting more fulfillment from the church than from the work I was doing to keep food on the table. Every year my wife and I would take out the idea of me becoming a minister and look at it. For years we thought either we couldn't afford it, or we felt too locked into what we were doing. Then one year the answer was 'yes'," Walsh said.

At the age of 40, he quit his job in industrial management, and moved east from Kingsport, Tennessee to enroll at the Harvard Divinity School. He graduated in 1980, and came to First Parish on Oct. 1 of that year.

Average time frame for a minister at a particular parish is eight or nine years, Walsh said. His ministry has obviously lasted much longer.

"I always figure when it was time to go, I would know, or [the parishioners] would let me know," Walsh joked.

Several factors led to his decision to retire at the end of January, the foremost being an impending marriage in June.

"Originally, we were going to get married Dec. 28. Everyone knew that was madness, with everything else going on, they just didn't tell us," Walsh said.

Walsh's fiancée lives in Hingham, where he will be living when he leaves First Parish.

"It's certainly a bittersweet time for me and a lot of the people here. We have to say goodbye to that relationship. Even if I see them when I come back to visit First Parish, or in some other context, I won't be their minister anymore," Walsh said.

There is a lot of grieving going on at the parish, Walsh said, but it helps that everyone knows "I am going somewhere wonderful."

"My leaving is not a rejection in any sense. This is a wonderful time in my life. I'm facing a new life with a new partner," Walsh said.

Walsh's last service will be on Jan. 5, with a celebratory luncheon to follow. He will then spend a couple of weeks cleaning out the parsonage.

After Walsh leaves, Rosemarie Smurzynski, an interim minister from Arlington, will serve First Parish for about eighteen months.

"It's healthy to have an interim minister. It allows people to adjust to the change. They are used to my style, it gives them a chance to work through those feelings," Walsh said.

A committee of parishioners will be formed to search for a settled, permanent minister. Walsh expects that a choice will be made in the spring of 2004, with the chosen minister as-

suming his or her duties in the fall of that year.

"That gives the committee time to search and to re-examine the mission of the church," Walsh said.

While he has yet to write his parting sermon, Walsh has recently spent time reflecting on his years at First Parish. One highlight that jumps to mind is the celebration that took place surrounding First Parish Congregation's 350th anniversary in 1982.

"The parish was gathered by pilgrims in 1632. It's amazing to have those kinds of roots. It was a wonderful celebration," Walsh said.

The parish organized a series of worship services, spread a month apart. Each of the four services represented a different century.

"We researched the services and music, and held services as they were held in 1632, 1732, 1832 and 1932. People wore costumes they had borrowed from Plimouth Plantation, and a group of them walked 9 miles in the rain, as the pilgrims did for services on Sundays," Walsh said.

The church also completed a capital fundraising campaign that allowed for the restoration of the meetinghouse and steeple, as well as numerous other indoor and outdoor renovations, including handicap accessibility projects.

Another high point Walsh likes to reflect on is when First Parish became a welcoming congregation to gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

"It's about being public. We spent a couple of years thinking about it, and then did it. We broke down barriers and affirmed their full humanity, and I'm proud of that. When you look at the history of Christianity towards homosexuals, it's so violent, I'm surprised any gay person would trust a church," Walsh said.

He also feels First Parish played an important and positive role in the Interfaith Council, shifting it from a "council of churches to a true interfaith organization," by welcoming Congregation Shirat Hayam.

Retirement will be busy for Walsh. He plans to work on a couple of writing projects on historical topics.

"For churches in Duxbury, 1820 to 1845 was a time of tremendous change. I've been able to gather a lot of primary source material during my time in Duxbury, but I'm a slow writer," Walsh said.

He will also spend a lot of time "being a good grandfather." Walsh has five grandchildren all under the age of six. Four of them live within an hour's drive of Hingham, which appears to put his writing time at risk.